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# Tribal Unrest

## Threatens Viet Effort

### Revolt May Weaken U.S.-Saigon Campaign to Halt Reds' Infiltration Through Laos, Cambodia

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SAIGON — Unrest among South Vietnam's tribal minorities is reportedly edging towards a revolt that could fragment this country's crucial highland regions and seriously weaken the present war effort here.

The tribal insurgents—often called montagnards—who have long held grievances against successive Saigon governments, are organized into a force estimated to number 3500 armed men. Their main strength is in Kontum, Darlac and Quangduc provinces, which border on Laos and Cambodia.

These provinces contain the infiltration routes through which most Communist troops and supplies pass into South Vietnam. Tribal agents in this area have been significant sources of intelligence on Communist movements.

The insurgents are part of a broad tribal movement that calls itself FULRO—a French acronym signifying the "united front for the struggle of oppressed Races." The front, which claims to represent some 35 different tribes, is believed to be rapidly gaining support among nearly a million highland people.

In particular, the FULRO is said to have won considerable sympathy within the units which, under United States special forces advisers, patrol the border regions. These units, comprising some 30,000 men, are known as the "civilian irregular defense group."

Evidently inspired by the FULRO, members of this American-backed defense group have staged sporadic uprisings within the past year. The most severe of these occurred last December, when the armed tribesmen rebelled in Quangduc and Phubon provinces. Their insurgent action in Phubon district capital resulted in 34 deaths.

In the view of experts here, the insurrection is again taking on new momentum that could lead to a "popular rebellion" in the central highlands.

One of the fresh factors in strengthening the insurgents has been the reported reinforcement of its political leadership. The head of the FULRO is a French-educated Rhade tribesman in his mid-forties, Ybahm Enoul, who formerly served as a Vietnamese government administrator in the highlands.

Disavowed by Silhanouk

Ybahm and his staff now direct their movement from a mobile headquarters in the southeastern Cambodian border region adjoining Vietnam's Quangduc province. The FULRO has been publicly disavowed by Cambodia's chief of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Western specialists in tribal affairs do not believe that the FULRO maintains a formal connection with the Communists. They allow, however, that certain tribal factions may be infiltrated by Vietcong operatives.

The tribal movement's grievances are primarily focused on efforts to win from the central Saigon government recognition of the distinct ethnic traits of the highland peoples. The FULRO also claims to have folded into its ranks other minorities in Vietnam, such as the Chams and Khmers, lowland groups.

Among its demands, the FULRO wants the right for minorities to teach their own languages, control their own land tracts and exercise a larger degree of political autonomy.

Point at Hanoi

Even the most anti-Communist tribal spokesmen point with a measure of envy at Communist North Vietnam, where highland minorities have been accorded nominally autonomous zones.

Different Saigon regimes, anxious to unify South Vietnam, have refused to acknowledge tribal identities.

In reaction, the tribal factions have frequently agitated in strikes and revolts. After a major strike in 1958, Ybahm and other tribal leaders were jailed by the late President Ngo Dinh Diem, and not released until after Diem's downfall in late 1963.

Although tribal representa-

tives meet regularly with the present Saigon government, virtually no progress has been made in meeting the FULRO demands. And specialists here doubt that a real settlement of this friction can be achieved—for the roots of the problem reach back to the dim depths of history.

Ethnically of proto-Malay stock, the tribal peoples were the aboriginal inhabitants of Vietnam. When the Viet tribes seeped down from the territory that is now China over 2000 years ago, they conquered these aborigines, taking their valley farmlands and driving them into higher regions.

As elsewhere in Asia, animosity between the valley Vietnamese and tribal highlanders has persisted. To eradicate this traditional friction will take generations. In its present crisis, however, Vietnam cannot wait that long.